



# United States Department of the Interior BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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August 12, 2014

In Reply Refer to:  
1610 (CA930) P

EMS TRANSMISSION: 8/22/14  
Instruction Memorandum No. CA-2014-030  
Expires: 9/30/2016

To: BLM California District and Field Managers and Public Affairs Officers  
Attention: NEPA Practitioners

From: State Director

Subject: National Environmental Policy Act Public Participation and Meetings

**Purpose:** Public involvement is important to the Bureau of Land Management and serves a critical role as part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. For some projects, public meetings provide an effective way of reaching out to the public during scoping and public comment periods. The purpose of this Instruction Memorandum (IM) is to provide guidance to Field and District Managers, NEPA practitioners and Public Affairs Officers when determining the appropriate format for public meetings.

**Policy/Action:** Public participation and public meetings may serve multiple purposes in the NEPA process. Additionally, the level of controversy and expected level of public participation may influence the format of a public meeting. It is important for managers and NEPA practitioners to define public participation goals before determining the appropriate meeting format.

While determining the appropriate type of public involvement and meetings, managers should consider the benefits of public participation:

- Transparency – public involvement allows the public to better understand the BLM’s decision-making process.
- Improved NEPA process – the public brings a diverse perspective to the NEPA process, and can often identify additional issues and alternatives for the BLM to consider.
- Trust and mutual understanding – the public may trust the BLM’s decision-making process more if they understand it, feel that they had an opportunity to be heard, and believe that the BLM took their concerns seriously.
- Improved decisions – the BLM makes better informed decisions if we consider information that the public presents to us in our decision-making process.

- Fewer surprises – early and effective public involvement identifies issues early, rather than having them raised at the last minute.

#### *Purpose of Public Meetings*

- **Scoping.** The BLM NEPA Handbook (H-1790-1) defines scoping as “the process by which the BLM solicits internal and external input on the issues, impacts, and potential alternatives that will be addressed in an EIS or EA as well as the extent to which those issues and impacts will be analyzed in the NEPA document.” External scoping involves notifications and opportunities for feedback from other agencies, organizations, tribes, local governments, and the public.

The purpose of a scoping meeting is often to introduce the public to a proposed action, and the process that the BLM will be using for its decision; to clarify questions about the proposed project and process; and solicit comments on coordination needs with other agencies, issues already identified by the BLM, and new issues and alternatives.

- **Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA).** During a public comment period, the BLM must notify the public of the opportunity to comment, and solicit comments on the environmental documents. Public comments help the BLM refine its analysis, identify new information or issues, and refine or change the alternatives analyzed in the NEPA document.

The purpose of public meetings during the Draft EIS or EA comment period is to answer questions about the proposed project and EIS or EA; explain the process used to analyze the proposed action and alternatives; clarify any outstanding questions from the public on the analysis; and solicit substantive comments on the Draft EIS or EA.

Additionally, during scoping and the comment period, public meetings can provide a forum for meeting attendees to verbally express their views regarding a particular issue to the BLM or to other members of the community, potentially sparking discussion and enhancing public understanding of the proposed action, alternatives, and the process, as well as the BLM’s understanding of potential impacts of the project to the public’s values and needs.

In addition to determining the purpose of a meeting, managers should also consider the following factors when deciding what format is appropriate.

- **Previous experience with interested parties.** Have certain types of public involvement been successful with interested individuals or groups in the past? Do those individuals and groups have expectations that the BLM should consider while still meeting the BLM’s public participation goals?
- **Cooperating Agencies.** If other federal agencies are cooperating on an EA or EIS, or if this is a joint NEPA/CEQA document, do those agencies have public meeting requirements or practices that the BLM could adopt?
- **Desired atmosphere.** Does the BLM desire a more formal or casual atmosphere? Which will further the BLM’s public participation goals?

## *Meeting Formats*

To determine the appropriate meeting format, the manager should consider the purpose of the public meeting, and the expected outcome. Below are some options to consider:

- **Hearings.** Public hearings are meetings run by a presiding officer, such as an Administrative Law Judge. These are the most formal meetings that the BLM can conduct. The primary outcome of a hearing is to present information to the public and receive testimony from the public. Because of its formal structure, there is little opportunity for interaction between the BLM and the public; therefore, if members of the public have questions, they must ask those questions in another forum. There is no opportunity for a member of the public to speak or ask questions unless they are willing to do so as part of the official witness testimony.

The procedures for hearings are contained in 455 Departmental Manual (DM) 1. If a manager decides to conduct a public hearing, they should work closely with the BLM-CA State Office to ensure that the proper procedures are followed.

- **Open Houses.** Open houses are an informal meeting format. Generally, the BLM will set up stations in the meeting venue and the public can come and go throughout the duration of the meeting. The BLM staff or contractors are available throughout the open house at different stations to answer questions and discuss the public's concerns. No verbal comments are taken or recorded at an open house, but individual staff may take notes. The BLM should provide a station where the public can submit their written comments.

Open houses are very interactive, and give the public an opportunity to ask detailed questions in a more informal environment. However, when public interest is high, it may be possible for stations to be overwhelmed, and not everyone has an opportunity to speak to specialists or have their questions answered. This may prevent individuals from getting basic information about the project. Members of the public don't necessarily get to hear what everyone else has to say, which some individuals value.

- **Town Halls.** In a Town Hall format, the BLM will start the meeting with a presentation, and then allow for verbal comments. It is recommended that the BLM use speaker cards or some other type of speaker registration, and may limit speakers' time based on the number of people who want to speak (i.e., 3-5 minutes). Although there may be some situations where the BLM wishes to capture verbal comments verbatim using a court reporter, there is no requirement to do so. Often, a note taker or use of a flip chart can adequately document the general information expressed at a meeting. If the BLM chooses to take notes or use flip charts, speakers should be encouraged to submit written comments if they want their comments to be fully considered in the analysis or decision. The BLM is not required to include a Question and Answer section. If the BLM chooses to answer questions, it is advisable to put clear side-boards on the types of questions that will be answered (i.e., procedural or factual questions) in order to avoid public debates or predecisional statements or commitments.

The benefit to Town Hall formats are that they provide the formality of a hearing, which certain members of the public expect, but with more flexibility. For projects with high public interest, the BLM can ensure that all meeting attendees get the same basic information about the project through the presentation. Members of the public can express their views both to the BLM and other meeting attendees. However, there is little opportunity for interaction with the BLM, and not all members of the public are comfortable with public speaking, and this format may discourage their participation.

- **Hybrid.** This meeting format combines Open Houses and Town Halls. In this format, the BLM will have an Open House as members of the public arrive, followed by a formal presentation, verbal comments, then breakout into an Open House for Questions and Answers and for the public to provide written comments. The benefit to this type of meeting is that everyone hears the same presentation and has an opportunity to speak publicly on the project if they choose to. Additionally, the Open House allows for more in-depth discussions and questions, and allows individuals that are not comfortable with public speaking to express their concerns directly to the BLM staff.
- **Workshops.** Workshops represent an opportunity for interested members of the public to discuss specific issues in-depth with the BLM staff. In a workshop, members of the public often break into small groups and are given assignments, such as specific questions to be answered or issues to be brainstormed. At the end of a workshop, the groups report out to the larger group. The reports may be captured in a variety of ways, such as by a group note taker or on flip charts. The benefit of this approach is that it allows members of the public to delve into the details of a proposed action and alternatives. However, it can require a large time commitment, and may require either a certain level of knowledge from participants or the time to educate participants on the in-depth topic. Generally, a workshop should be used to supplement other methods of public involvement and may not be appropriate as the only public meeting.

Regardless of the meeting format that a manager chooses, the following are best practices for all meeting formats.

- **Have appropriate staff on hand.** Managers and project managers should try to anticipate the types of questions they will receive, and have the appropriate individuals available. This may include the BLM manager, the project manager, a facilitator for more controversial projects or larger crowds (a contractor or project manager can often serve this role), the BLM or contractor specialists for affected resources, and applicant representatives (if applicable). If a project has a large geo-spatial component, such as a Travel Management Plan, consider having a GIS specialist and a GIS station where the public can see detailed maps of the project area and resources important to them.
- **Let the public know what to expect.** Disclose the meeting format in meeting announcements and press releases. This allows the public to be prepared and decide whether the meeting format will meet their needs. This is especially important if the BLM is not going to record verbal comments.
- **Provide reasonable accommodations.** If the BLM is not recording verbal comments, and a member of the public is unable to provide written comments, the BLM should make reasonable accommodations to ensure that individual is able to fully participate. One way to

do this is to provide a station with a contractor-supplied or BLM computer, and someone who can capture dictated comments or that can be directly typed by the commenter.

**Timeframe:** Effective immediately.

**Budget Impact:** None. Field Offices already conduct public meetings during the NEPA process.

**Background:** Historically, the BLM has enjoyed a very robust and at times intense public involvement during the NEPA process. Although the BLM can engage with the public throughout the decision-making process, formal public involvement generally occurs at two stages: scoping and public comment on an EA or Draft EIS.

Both scoping and public comment periods are required for EISs. For EAs, the requirements are more flexible, but there must be some level of public involvement. When appropriate, public meetings provide an effective way of reaching out to the public during scoping and public comment periods.

**Manual/Handbook Sections Affected:** The BLM National Environmental Policy Act Handbook H-1790-1.

**Coordination:** These policies have been coordinated and reviewed by the Division of Natural Resources and the Division of External Affairs.

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**Districts with Unions** are reminded to notify their unions of this IM and satisfy any bargaining obligations before implementation. Your servicing Human Resources Office or Labor Relations Specialist can provide assistance in this matter.

Signed by:  
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